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Speculation

Can animals paint? Are elephants artists? Or dogs? To be sure, we are not proposing a Zen conundrum, but a concrete question that arose after people were able to observe… animals painting. "Can animals paint?" is therefore an awkward question, precisely because they have been observed to do so! See the many videos on the internet, or go to a place where you can observe it yourself. However, the full scope of the question – the scope that makes for controversial debates – is: can animals *really* paint? And, in telescopic fashion, this question again transports even more precise and pressing issues: can animals really paint as a function of their own intention and artistic creativity? Are animals like human artists? Do they master and own their work? The debates about these elephants, dogs and dolphins - like many debates about things we do not know much about - are founded upon the opposition between the miraculous (they are natural born artists!) versus debunking (it is only the trainer guiding the animals through gentle strokes and other subtle cues). Put in such terms, the debate offers only two alternatives, both of which are, when you think about it, equally uninteresting: a dubious promotion for animals to the status of near-humanity; or a disenchanting explanation of the facts behind the painting illusion. Ethologist and empirical philosopher Vinciane Despret (2016) thinks that both alternatives are unengaging and uninteresting, as they simply extend existing frameworks of how we think about humanity, and about animals as the horizon of species against which humanity defines itself. But what would you expect for an answer, if you are asking bad questions? A bad question, for Despret, implies that new ways of thinking about an issue are excluded because of the very question youare asking. Despret evaluates questions in terms of their consequences for thinking: if a question merely extends the terms of what we already think we know, then what is the point in asking it? The answer is already there.

Therefore, Despret offers no 'third way' between miracles versus illusions, but changes the question and the framework altogether. She slows down and allows for a moment of perplexity: isn't it very strange that the initial experience of amazement towards a situation becomes systematically re-examined as being justified (in case an expert voice concludes that animals are natural born geniuses) or not justified (if an expert concludes that it is only the trainer guiding an obedient animal)? Isn't the fear of being 'duped' in the face of an illusion very peculiar, as it makes our experience of perplexity and amazement depend upon an authorization that we are 'in our right' to be perplexed and amazed? Despret remarks that spectators know very well that the painting is not the animal's own original idea, and that the animal needs help in achieving the artwork. This is precisely the point: the spectators witness a situation in which humans and animals achieve something together. That is a new starting point leading to very different questions and lines of thought. No longer obsessed with the question whether what

we are witnessing is really real, we can now inquire into what makes a particular achievement possible; how humans and animals can collaborate; how humans and animals can mutually learn; how learning situations can be created without coercion, etc. Asking what makes up a situation, the elements it is composed of and how it is composed, means inquiring into the consequences and further developments of that situation. And thinking those consequences in return requires that we reconsider what elements matter in the initial situation. That is speculation, and it becomes clear that speculation is not merely abstract thinking (as the term might convey) but that it requires keeping in touch with the empirical. Yet, it is a peculiar form of empiricism in that what is 'empirical' – or what is given in an experience or a situation - is not taken for granted but part of the question. This necessary connection between thought and the empirical constrains and defines speculative thinking. Early-20th-Century philosopher A.N. Whitehead wrote that such constraints are productive and necessary to think creatively. (Debaise 2006) Speculation, then, is not 'free of charge.' To speculate may indeed convey something of a cozy artistic brainstorm but this is a misleading image of speculation *and* of artistic work. Just like artistic work (including animals painting), speculation requires training and conceptual clarity in the light of specific constraints. In defining speculation, A.N. Whitehead insists on these constraints, such as the relation to the empirical and the proper use of rationality. For Whitehead, speculation is a method. (Debaise 2006)

As a method of posing 'good' questions - i.e. inquiring into what a situation is composed of; how its different elements relate and matter; and where the situation might lead in its implications - it should be clear that speculating is very different from what is commonly understood by interpreting. Interpretation presupposes that a given situation is exterior from, and unaffected by, its interpreter. It implies that the situation is a state of affairs out there, and that the interpreter asks what meaning should be given to that situation. People often say that such-and-so is a 'matter of interpretation,' which is often a way to avoid asking more compelling questions about that situation. Speculation, on the other hand, hinges upon the mutual definition of the components of a situation and those who speculate with it. Posing speculative questions does not leave the situation unaffected, and one cannot but *involve* oneself in a situation, become part of it in a way, in order to speculate. Consider again the example of painting animals as it is approached by Vinciane Despret. Looking at a situation made up of animals, humans, audiences, pencils and yet other elements, the question of how animals and humans can achieve things together opens up a perspective on relations that render those that are part of it capable of new things. The 'essence' of the beings in relation is not the issue, but the possibility of their mutual transformation is. Despret approaches the painting situation in such a way that its elements take on a compelling importance. The question of the paintings, in terms of an interspecies achievement, explores the boundaries of humanness and animal-ness, in the sense that our speculative question sets interspecies capabilities as a moving horizon – moved by the practice of painting - and not as a question that serves to decide whether the paintings are 'real.' Even human art comes to look different through this approach, and perhaps closer to the artists' experience itself: aren't they the first to claim that inspiration 'happened' to them? Aren't they the first to situate each artwork within a process that involves elements that moved them to create?

A key question in speculative thinking is: what might become possible? The difference between interpretation and speculation can be noticed here again. The question shifts from the interpretation of an event in terms of the fixed capabilities of animals (can or cannot really paint) to speculating with that event in order to ask what humans and animals might become capable of together. Research in ethology provides empirical evidence for the fact that addressing animals as intelligent beings gives entirely different results from traditional behaviorist approaches. When treated as intelligent beings, animals respond intelligently. It is like a self-fulfilling prophecy, except that we are not in the register of 'prophecies' but in a pragmatist mode of thinking, like the philosopher William James, evaluating ideas and concepts (not prophecies) in terms of their consequences. For example, assuming and soliciting intelligence in animals (and why not try humans?) obliges to rethink practices of breeding and keeping animals, and ecology more broadly. Speculation engages with the empirical, and indeed with reality, as a process that may take different directions. The difference between assuming a given world ('open to interpretation') or involving oneself in a speculative process where thinking and reality inform each other is not an epistemological difference (asking what knowledge is and what we can know), but it is a political one. If reality could be different, then how do we want it to be different? And what way of describing reality or a situation enables to think reality differently? A good example of this is the book *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* by Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers (2011). The book starts from a specific historical situation: the protests in Seattle against the WTO summit in 1999. Rather than explaining or interpreting the situation as a 'case of' something more general –protest from the masses, for example – Pignarre and Stengers look for inventive resources in order to transmit and relay these acts of resistance. The book does not develop any political programme but puts the question what our current political situation is composed of, and who 'we' are, to the fore. Asking these questions is in itself an act of resistance to ready-made problem-definitions about the 'economy,' for example, in mainstream media and politics. (see also Stengers 2015)

Speculation has a political valence in that it resists theories that subtract things from the world instead of adding things. Such subtracting may happen for example by defining particular events or situations as 'cases' of something more general, thereby sterilizing the force that a situation, experience or event may have in obliging us to think. Speculation runs against the fitting of the world into an analytical grid and defining its elements – because analytical grids and theoretical frameworks are, in a sense, not analytical enough. They move too fast and conclude too quickly. That speculation is analytical, requiring care for concepts and technicity in writing, is particularly salient in both the content and writing style of feminist and science studies scholar Donna Haraway (2007). She constantly tries to unsettle our assumptions about the world 'as it is' by invoking pluralities where one tends to use a singular name; by the use of metaphors, tropes and seeming contradictions. Here, analysis does not serve the purpose of simplification and generalization but it serves to create new differences, like a prism breaking light. In Haraway's speculative thinking, there is not one given world, but we are constantly making worlds. The question of who or what 'we' are, or could be, is part of that speculative endeavor.

Is speculation then just a complicated way of saying: "The world is what we make of it?" If so, do we need speculative thought to tell us this? Wasn't capitalism telling us that story already?

Let us be more analytic and pose better questions: who are 'we,' and which world(s) is one referring to in the phrase: "The world is what we make of it?" If you simplify and generalize 'the world' as a set of resources to be exploited and transformed at will, then that is capitalism for you, and it is one particular and violent way of world-making indeed (if 'making' is still the appropriate term, rather than 'destroying'). It is precisely this entrepreneurial violence that the thinkers referred to in this lemma want to move away from. And you can only move away from violent practices by acknowledging that violence is there in the first place. Stories about interspecies relations take on a particular edge here, and we can perhaps better understand why stories of dogs, pigs, cows and other species are so present in the texts of several of today's speculative thinkers. The very fact that these animals and their stories seem so trivial with respect to 'more serious' scholarship about war, capitalism, and neoliberalism, indicates that one is dealing with a field of high political tension: "they are only pigs" because industrialized food production *requires pork meat*. Speculative thought ventures into those areas that are not considered an 'option' by those who want to keep dominant production systems running. In those production systems, animal and human intelligence are definitely not an option. Let alone the possibility to have more of it. With respect to such an economic and political status quo, stories about painting animals are as unruly as the cries of the protesters in Seattle. Speculation is a methodical rendering of the unruliness that pervades the world. An unruliness that obliges us to reconsider what we mean by the phrase: "The world is what we make of it."

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Further reading:

Debaise, Didier (2006), *Un empirisme spéculatif. Lecture de* Procès et réalité *de Whitehead.* Paris: VRIN.

Despret, Vinciane (2016), *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Trans. Brett Buchanan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Pignarre, Philippe. and Stengers, Isabelle (2011), *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stengers, Isabelle (2015), *In Catastrophic Times. Resisting the Coming Barbarism.* Lüneburg: OpenHumanities Press/ Meson Press.